

**MOVE FORWARD WITH FAITH AND THANKSGIVING**  
*a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 20, 2016*  
**Based on II Chronicles 20:1-23, 27**

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, "Navigating the Storm – How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times." Earlier in this series we considered a number of stories in which people were literally navigating through a storm at sea; but our main focus has been on the various storms that we face in life – and how we can navigate in our own experience through troubling times. We can gain insight and inspiration from the Scripture story we heard this morning from the book of II Chronicles. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The story this morning from II Chronicles is one of the battle stories of the Old Testament. The time period of Biblical history was a time when the world was full of warfare -- though perhaps not much more so than the world today -- and the people of Israel were constantly subjected to raids and attacks from neighboring kingdoms. Biblical writers, however, had no interest in recording battle stories per se; the accounts of battles and kings were recorded in other historical books at the time. Whenever a Biblical book tells a story like the one we heard, it does so because the events are seen to contain some sort of lasting spiritual message. This is certainly the case with our story this morning.

The story occurs during the reign of King Jehoshaphat (what a great name -- it means "The Lord is Judge"). During his reign in the 9th century B.C., the land of Judah was subjected to a massive invasion by the combined armies of the three nations that lay to the east -- the Moabites, the Ammonites, and group of Edomites (called the Meunites or the "inhabitants of Mount Seir"). Jehoshaphat and his small nation faced total destruction. As the invading army approached, Jehoshaphat called the people to prayer. Many of them came to the temple in Jerusalem. There Jehoshaphat prayed to God for deliverance, and the prayer concludes with Jehoshaphat saying, "We do not know what we should do, but our eyes, O Lord, are upon you." [II Chronicles 20:12]

Can you imagine a political leader saying that today? Leaders generally want to at least pretend they know what to do; but Jehoshaphat was a very honest and humble leader. When he says, "We do not know what we should do," he connects with all of us when we are in tough times and are at a real loss for what we can do. But his last line is key – "Our eyes, O Lord, are upon you." Here is a fundamental spiritual principle for life. Whenever we find ourselves assailed by trouble, when the pressure is on and there is no immediately apparent solution, we can join in this movement of prayer – to fix our eyes upon God.

Then a man stands up in the assembly, an early prophet named Jahaziel. He declares, "Fear not, do not be dismayed, for the battle is not yours but God's." (II Chronicles 20:15)

In other words, you don't have to do this alone. God is with you, and God will bring you through. This in fact is a central Scriptural message that we have been hearing

throughout this sermon series. As people in Biblical times faced various stormy trials – from Noah on the waters to the disciples caught on the sea of Galilee to the apostle Paul and his companions in a raging storm on the Mediterranean, the message they have consistently received is that they were not alone, but that God was with them and would bring them through the storm. Thus the message of the prophet Jahaziel, “Fear not,” would be the same message that Jesus spoke to his disciples when they were having a rough time on the Sea of Galilee [*Jesus said, “Fear not . . . Matthew 14:26*] and the same message that Paul heard from God in the midst of the storm [*“Fear not, Paul . . . Acts 27:24*] It is a message we need to hear today – that God reigns over all and God is at work for good; we need not be afraid.

So Jahaziel and Jehoshaphat called the people to put their trust in God. The next day, Jehoshaphat gathered the people together and said, “Listen to me, everyone. Have faith in the Lord your God, and you will be upheld.” (II Chronicles 20:20) Then he summoned the people to one of the most extraordinary actions of faith recorded anywhere in the Bible.

Our passage says, “Jehoshaphat appointed people to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of His holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying, “Give thanks to the Lord, for His steadfast love endures forever.” (II Chronicles 20:21) So here is the picture. There is a massive army of three combined nations encamped near Jerusalem, intent on slaughtering the inhabitants of the city. The people of Judah are to march out toward those invaders, singing hymns. The choir is to be in front of the puny army of Judah. Who wants to sign up for the choir? And they are supposed to sing a song that says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for His steadfast love endures forever.”

This song seems a bit premature. What is there to give thanks for? They are in a serious jam, and it looks like they are about to get slaughtered. But they give thanks before they see any resolution of their crisis.

Here surely is a model for us. We often approach Thanksgiving with the idea that we give thanks for blessings received. But here in our Scripture story they give thanks for blessings promised. They have no idea how things are going to turn out; but they give thanks because God is a God of steadfast love, and they trust that God’s goodness will prevail and that God is leading them toward a positive destiny.

Moreover, as they give thanks, they do not just sit back waiting for some sort of divine deliverance, but they move forward toward the problem with faith and thanksgiving. It would have been one thing to huddle behind the walls of Jerusalem hoping for the problem to go away, but these people step out in faith. Our Scripture says, “They rose early in the morning and went into the wilderness of Tekoa.” (II Chronicles 20:20) The wilderness of Tekoa was a wide-open area of desert a few miles east of Jerusalem; this would have been toward the spot where the invading army was encamped! This is a powerful picture of the fact that faith is not a passive or a cautious thing. Faith involves moving forward toward challenges with a trust that God will be at work.

We do this in our church all the time. A few years ago, we were approached by our

District Superintendent asking if we could help a struggling new mission church in our District, Heart 4 the City, which was doing exciting outreach work among low-income people in the Goodyear Heights neighborhood of Akron. It was operating out of a United Methodist church building that had been closed a couple years before, and that was now revived for this purpose. We made an annual commitment to give \$5000 to undergird Heart 4 the City. We did not have \$5000 at hand, and it was not in our budget. We stepped forward in faith, trusting that if we included Heart 4 the City in a couple of our mission offerings, such as our current Thanksgiving Offering, where Heart 4 the City is one of the major projects being supported, our congregation would step up, and we would have the funds required. In fact we have now been able to support Heart 4 the City to the tune of \$5000 per year for three years running.

Last summer, at Mountain T.O.P., our church, which has been one of the strongest supporters of the Mountain T.O.P. mission over the years, was invited to be a part of a pilot project next summer. For years, we have provided a youth team with adult leaders to do minor home repair projects and to help run a day camp in Grundy County, Tennessee, which is one of the poorest counties in the United States. The pilot project involves expanding our Mountain T.O.P. outreach to include additional volunteers who will do major home repairs, under the direction of licensed contractors, and still more volunteers who will help run a high adventure camp for teenagers in Grundy County. Those additional volunteers would need to be youth age seventeen or older or adults. We made a commitment to take this on, and we have a target to send 100 volunteers altogether to Mountain T.O.P. this coming summer. We have never sent a team anywhere near this size anywhere. But we are trusting that more older teens, young adults, and adults of every age will hear God's call to go to the mountain to be a part of this mission outreach. Mark your calendar – July 8-15, 2017 – maybe God is calling you!

Or for yet another example of stepping toward a challenge for which you are not fully equipped, a couple weeks ago, we signed a contract to paint the sanctuary ceiling, which is in desperate need of repair, now that we have fixed the sanctuary roof which had allowed water seepage that damaged the ceiling. We have a prime timing opportunity for this. We will be closing the sanctuary to do the work for two weeks following Christmas; the Sunday that is in the middle of that two week period, when the sanctuary will be closed, is New Year's Day. We will have a combined worship service that morning for all worship hours at 10:00 in the gymnasium. We don't actually have enough money yet to paint the sanctuary ceiling; but we have made an extra appeal for the Raise the Roof fund, and we are stepping forward in faith.

There are many occasions in life when we face a daunting challenge, and we are called to move forward trusting that God will be at work around us and through us, and God will provide. This in fact is exactly what the early pilgrims were doing that we especially remember on our American Thanksgiving. As the pilgrims arrived at the wilderness in

Massachusetts, they connected themselves in their own minds with the ancient Israelites, and they thought particularly about what happened when the Israelites were journeying into a wilderness. Last Sunday we talked about some of the early stories of the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel as they came out of Egypt; and we noted that the wilderness in the Bible signifies a place of great challenge and uncertainty. What the pilgrims recalled was that when you are heading into a wilderness, you are not going to know how things are going to work out; what you must do is move forward in faith -- trusting in the leading and the providence of God.

Our story this morning recalls that image of “the wilderness” when it says that “the people went into the wilderness of Tekoa.” (II Chronicles 20:20) In this open desert area outside Jerusalem, the people of Judah were in a place of great uncertainty and peril, but they had confidence that God would be at work. So they stepped forth singing God’s praise, even before they saw any answer to their need.

And God was indeed at work. Our story moves to an extraordinary conclusion, as God brings about a miraculous deliverance of the people of Judah. Our passage reports, “As the people began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated; for the Ammonites and Moabites rose against the men from Mount Seir to annihilate them, and after they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they destroyed one another.” (II Chronicles 20:23) It is not clear what exactly happened, but this is not the first time in ancient history that marauding tribes in an invading alliance fell apart and began fighting with each other. Whether it was by confusion or dissension, the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites ended up battling one another, and their army disintegrated. The people of Judah were delivered exactly as Jahaziel had proclaimed; as he said, “You will not have to fight this battle; stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will give you.” (II Chronicles 20:17)

There is a good deal in life today that can threaten us and that can cause us to be in fear. But God’s Word in the Scripture brings us enormous encouragement: “Fear not . . . Have faith in the Lord your God, and you will be established.” (II Chronicles 20:17,20) So we can put our trust in God, we can move forward in faith, and we can join in that ancient song: “Give thanks to the Lord, for His steadfast love endures forever.” (II Chronicles 20:21)